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BEYOND HUMANITY: THE DATACENTRIC WORLDVIEW

GENERICSCIENCE BIG DATA, DATA, GOOGLE, INFORMATION, SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM

...new technologies may suggest, create, even impose new ends, never before conceived, simply by offering their feasibility.

—Hans Jonas, *Toward a Philosophy of Technology*

For years now philosophers, scientists, artists, pundits, academics, social-critics, etc. have spoken of the death of humanism and the rise of post-humanism. Hans Jonas in a perceptive reading at mid-century discussing the rise of computer and intelligence industries and their technological take-over iterated of modernity:

The world they help to constitute and which needs computers for its very running is no longer nature supplemented, imitated, improved, transformed, the original habitat made more habitable. In the pervasive mentalization of physical relationships it is a trans-nature of human making, but with this inherent paradox: that it threatens the obsolescence of man himself, as increasing automation ousts him from the places of work where he formerly proved his humanhood. And there is a further threat: its strain on nature herself may reach a breaking point.¹

If as Harari stated in his recent futurology that according to “humanism, humans must draw from within their inner experiences not only the meaning of their own lives, but also the meaning of the entire universe. This is the primary commandment humanism has given us: create meaning for a meaningless world.”² Then in our age as we move past or beyond the old humanist paradigm in which man was the center and circumference of world, thought, and meaning something new is arising to displace man from his dreams of power and control over the universe. Machinic intelligence in the coming century may not only displace human aspirations and dreams but by its very presence make the human irrelevant and meaningless in this new world of accelerating technology.

For Harari humanism sought to instill within humanity the drive toward immortality, bliss and divinity. As he put it: “Since humanism has long sanctified the life, the emotions and the desires of human beings, it’s hardly surprising that a humanist civilisation will want to maximise human lifespans, human happiness and human power (ibid.)”. And, yet, in its bid to realize such dreams Harari also showed that “this humanist dream will undermine its very foundations, by unleashing new post-humanist technologies” (ibid.). One aspect of Harari’s argument is that the very foundations of liberal humanism – the belief in the

individual, free-will, and autonomy are undermined by the very power of the sciences that gave us and supported the political, social, and secular world view of liberalism itself. After marshalling a number of recent experiments across several disciplines that show the truth of this lack of self and free-will he asks:

At the beginning of the third millennium, liberalism is threatened not by the philosophical idea that 'there are no free individuals' but rather by concrete technologies. We are about to face a flood of extremely useful devices, tools and structures that make no allowance for the free will of individual humans. Can democracy, the free market and human rights survive this flood? (ibid.)

Yet, the most powerful aspect of the new technologies arising in our midst that will not only undermine the very core of the liberal humanist tradition but bring about the obsolescence of humanity itself as the center of existence is the autonomy of intelligent machines. "Humans are in danger of losing their value, because intelligence is decoupling from consciousness" (ibid.). This subtraction of intelligence from the human in a world of algorithmic governance and control may seem dubious to many but this is happening all around us.

In the near future such products that are only in the beginning stages such as Microsoft's Cortana, Google's Now and Apple's Siri are headed in the same direction, learning more about us than we know about ourselves. In a world where every aspect of our lives, both the inscribed external traces as well as the internal biochemical traces of our sub autonomic systems of bodily functions, appetites, emotions, etc. are accessible to algorithmic software programs that can produce, analyze, collate, and judge the various components of our lives we will effectively lose control over our own decision making processes. With the use of advance facial recognition, biometric sensors, and other advance monitoring devices from medical to job related, etc., our lives will become datafied and externalized within a global network of traces in which our digital selves will become more important than our physical lives; or, become supplements that can exist in a 24/7 global environment through our electronic agents and avatars who will make appointments, provide queries, perform many of the intellectual duties we ourselves are incapable of doing to the point that we as humans may be bypassed while our avatars live on without us.

Eventually, we may reach a point when it will be impossible to disconnect from this all-knowing network even for a moment. Disconnection will mean death. If medical hopes are realized, future people will incorporate into their bodies a host of biometric devices, bionic organs and nano-robots, which will monitor our health and defend us from infections, illnesses and damage. Yet these devices will have to be online 24/7, both in order to be updated with the latest medical news, and in order to protect them from the new plagues of cyberspace. (ibid. KL 5132) Yet, as Harrari informs us science is already transforming the old liberal humanist notions of self and free-will to the point that we have as humans become mere organic algorithms ourselves:

The new technologies of the twenty-first century may thus reverse the humanist revolution, stripping humans of their authority, and empowering non-human algorithms instead. If you are horrified by this direction, don't blame the computer geeks. The responsibility actually lies with the biologists. It is crucial to realize that this entire trend is fueled by biological insights more than by computer science. It is the life sciences that have concluded that organisms are algorithms. If this is not the case – if organisms function in an inherently different way to algorithms – then computers may work wonders in other fields, but they will not be able to understand us and direct our life, and they will certainly be incapable of merging with us. Yet once biologists concluded that organisms are algorithms, they dismantled the wall between the organic and inorganic, turned the computer revolution from a purely mechanical affair into a biological cataclysm, and shifted authority from individual humans to networked algorithms. (ibid. KL 5138)

As we merge with our machinic cousins over the coming decades the wall between human/machine, organic/inorganic will be hard to sustain. As algorithmic systems both organic and inorganic incorporate us into the global network society of this strange future we will no longer be seen as independent autonomous creatures but rather as part/wholes of a vast system of algorithms enfolded into a world of artificial layers and scales. "Reality will be a mesh of biochemical and electronic algorithms, without clear borders, and without individual hubs" (ibid. KL 5155).

This future holds our three threats to the liberal humanist world view that has sustained us for the past few centuries: 1) the notion that humans will lose their value completely; secondly, that humans will still be valuable collectively, but they will lose their individual authority, and will instead be managed by external algorithms; and, third threat that some people will remain both indispensable and undecipherable, but they will constitute a small and privileged elite of upgraded humans. (ibid. KL 5161) As technological advances in biogenetics allows these new elites and their progeny access to upgrades that others can only dream of the world of the liberal humanist political, social, and religious traditions will collapse:

These superhumans will enjoy unheard-of abilities and unprecedented creativity, which will allow them to go on making many of the most important decisions in the world. They will perform crucial services for the system, while the system could not understand and manage them. However, most humans will not be upgraded, and they will consequently become an inferior caste, dominated by both computer algorithms and the new superhumans. (ibid. KL 5162)

Yet, if the new elites can upgrade their own children both biochemically and technologically, they can to keep themselves in power begin *downgrading* the rest of us: The system may prefer downgraded humans not because they would possess any superhuman knacks, but because they would lack some really disturbing human qualities that hamper the system and slow it down. As any farmer knows, it's usually the brightest goat in the herd that stirs up the greatest trouble, which is why the

Agricultural Revolution involved downgrading animal mental abilities. The second cognitive revolution dreamed up by techno-humanists might do the same to us. (ibid. KL 5405)

In this brave new world of downgraded and upgraded humans biological castes or clads will replace the liberal humanist systems to the point that intermixing between the two will be outlawed. As governments and governance give way to algorithmic monitoring and real time policing of our desires and experiences in a globalized world of inhuman agents the very access to information will become itself controlled and monitored by these elites and their superintelligent machines.

As a data controlled world replaces human governing agents and politics the need for voting and the very foundations of liberal humanist free-will and autonomy will be consigned to the dustbin of history. As Harari informs us:

Dataists believe that humans can no longer cope with the immense flows of data, hence they cannot distil data into information, let alone into knowledge or wisdom. The work of processing data should therefore be entrusted to electronic algorithms, whose capacity far exceeds that of the human brain. In practice, this means that Dataists are sceptical about human knowledge and wisdom, and prefer to put their trust in Big Data and computer algorithms. (ibid. KL 5479)

Already the decoupling of economics from politics as we've seen in the EU has eliminated this trust factor to the point that governments are powerless to act or defy such an impersonal system of law and financial institutions. As the world relies more and more on algorithmic systems of economics and law to order the transactions between corporations, governments, and individuals the need for human intervention will go by the wayside. "From a Dataist perspective, we may interpret the entire human species as a single data-processing system, with individual humans serving as its chips" (ibid. KL 5619)

In conclusion Harari says our datacentric worldview that is replacing the liberal humanist one has three defining features:

1. Science is converging on an all-encompassing dogma, which says that organisms are algorithms, and life is data processing.
2. Intelligence is decoupling from consciousness.
3. Non-conscious but highly intelligent algorithms may soon know us better than we know ourselves.

Then he asks us to think hard on the above and ask these questions: 1) Are organisms really just algorithms, and is life really just data processing? 2) What's more valuable – intelligence or consciousness? 3) What will happen to society, politics and daily life when non-conscious but highly intelligent algorithms know us better than we know ourselves?

Do you have an answer?

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1. Jonas Hans, Toward of Philosophy of Technology. Hastings Center Report 1979
 2. Harari, Yuval Noah. Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow. Harper; Reprint edition (February 21, 2017)
 3. taken from here

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